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STATE FOR EUR/CE, PASS TO NSC ADAM STERLING

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING WITH
SLOVAK PRESIDENT IVAN GASPAROVIC

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik, for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) I met with President Gasparovic September 30, and from his perspective the timing of his visit to Washington could not be more auspicious. The trip will link him in the minds of Slovak voters with accession to the Visa Waiver Program, one of the brightest spots in our bilateral relations. While Gasparovic clearly values the transatlantic relationship and shares many of our views on key foreign policy challenges, the Slovak Government -- now led by Prime Minister Robert Fico -- pursues a less pro-U.S. foreign policy and he actively seeks closer economic and political ties with Moscow. While President Gasparovic may sometimes also defer to Russian views, he wants Slovakia to be a responsible Ally and, in internal government debates, pushes for greater Slovak engagement, such as in Afghanistan and meeting Bucharest NATO Summit commitments. President Gasparovic is likely to be reelected in April 2009. His advisors have told me that he intends to be a more "activist" President in his next term, particularly on foreign and defense policy issues. This meeting with President Bush can encourage a popular politician to become a more assertive proponent of transatlantic values and cooperation.

¶2. (C) Slovakia is an economic success story. Following the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Meciar in the 1990's, the country underwent rapid reform under former Prime Minister Dzurinda. Within six years, Slovakia went from being the "Black Hole of Europe," to the "Tatra Tiger," with invitations to join NATO and the European Union. The reforms were difficult, however, and in 2006 the voters elected Robert Fico, who promised a more "social democratic" government.

¶3. (C) But despite threats to roll back many of the key reforms, the current government has kept Slovakia on track economically. It made the final push for adoption of the Euro and accession to the Schengen zone. Foreign investors continue to come to Slovakia, which now produces the highest number of automobiles per capita in the world. U.S. companies have invested almost 4 billion USD in Slovakia to date.

¶4. (C) Thus, in fifteen short years since Slovakia achieved full independence, it has created a thriving market economy, joined NATO and the European Union, served effectively on the UN Security Council and been accepted into the Schengen and Eurozones. Slovak soldiers serve in Afghanistan and Kosovo. Slovak NGOs are helping to build civil society in countries like Serbia, Belarus, Afghanistan and Cuba. And very soon, I hope, Slovakia will enter the Visa Waiver Program.

¶5. (C) At home, European Union accession is bringing significant EU funds to help develop lagging infrastructure. This will help broaden the geographic base of investment

beyond Bratislava. Yet, despite these successes, the current government displays several troubling tendencies that could potentially threaten Slovakia's continued progress at home and its reputation abroad. Gasparovic at times acts as a moderating force to Fico's populist and social-democratic stances.

16. (C) Chief among these tendencies is the government's almost wholly uncritical stance toward Moscow. The government has, for instance, refused to recognize Kosovo -- a stance Gasparovic has vocally supported. But where Fico has criticized U.S. missile defense plans, Gasparovic has supported them. The official Slovak policy is to support Georgia's territorial integrity, a view PM Fico has articulated publicly even while he has also spoken about Georgian "provocations." In the weeks following the invasion, the government hosted Deputy Prime Minister Sechin and announced closer economic cooperation with Moscow, particularly on energy. With this issue as with others, Gasparovic's ability to stake out a separate position from Fico's is limited by the Fico government's popularity, the nature of Slovak presidency, and the shakiness of Gasparovic's own political base (although Gasparovic himself is popular, he lacks a party infrastructure).

17. (C) The other disturbing tendencies fall under the rubric of "reform fatigue." Slovakia has not progressed recently in the fight against corruption, the strengthening of civil society, and the expansion of democratic and open practices. Although PM Fico has sacked four Ministers for corruption or other ethics related problems, some current ministers are widely believed to be corrupt. Prime Minister Fico's partners

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in the governing coalition, Vladimir Meciar and far-right nationalist Jan Slota, are infamous for their inexplicable wealth and unsavory connections. The Parliament in March passed one of the most restrictive press laws in Europe. While Gasparovic could provide some useful pressure toward progress, again he has not done so, perhaps because he lacks a firm basis to challenge the popular Prime Minister.

18. (C) Finally, under the Fico government, relations between Slovakia and Hungary have worsened. A vicious cycle has developed in which Slovak nationalists -- led by coalition partner Jan Slota -- and ethnic Hungarian politicians (both in Slovakia and Hungary) bait each other. In addition to Slota's frequent anti-Hungarian rhetoric, even more mainstream Slovak politicians have criticized events such as meetings in Budapest of the "Forum for Parliamentary Members from the Carpathian Basin" (an entity made up of ethnic Hungarians from around the region, affiliated with the Hungarian Parliament). This political level tit-for-tat gets abundant play in the media, obscuring the effective and close cooperation between the two countries on many economic, regional and other issues. Rather than condemning this cycle, let alone Slota's inflammatory remarks, Gasparovic has made it clear that he thinks the Hungarians are mostly at fault for the tension. The notion that Hungarians in Slovakia could use Kosovo as a precedent here is risible, yet, given the long and vexed history of Slovak-Hungarian relations, President Gasparovic might tell you that it's a concern.

19. (C) If Gasparovic wins reelection, and the indications are that he will, I do believe he will be willing to distance himself publicly from the Prime Minister on key issues. He has told me that he thinks the Prime Minister's approach to Iran, for example, is "irresponsible" because Fico downplays the threat. Slovakia is anchored in NATO and the EU, but it is drifting a bit. Gasparovic can help, over time, bring it more firmly into the Euro-Atlantic ambit. Slovakia needs a strong advocate for transatlantic values in a position of influence; over the next few years, Gasparovic is the most likely person to play that role. The U.S. needs a stronger ally among the Slovak leadership, and I think Gasparovic is also ready to play that role.

¶10. (C) Separately I will be reporting additional details of my September 30 meeting with Gasparovic.
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